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EUR/CE FOR J. MOORE AND M. LIBBY

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SUBJECT: SLOVAK TRUCKERS THREATEN BLOCKADE OVER TOLLS

SUMMARY

1. Slovak truckers are threatening to block gas stations nationwide to protest the new electronic toll system that is to be activated on January 1. Dissident members of the national trucking association are trying to force the government to reduce prices for installation of dashboard tolling equipment as well as the tolls themselves. While the truckers have won a small concession on the installation charges, the blockade is going forward on January 4. End summary.

Protesting High Prices

2. After several days of threats and months of acrimonious debate, dissident members of the Association of Road Transport Companies (CESMAD), which represents 1,100 trucking companies, are threatening to block gas stations on January 4, the first working day of the new year. The immediate cause of the threats is the price of installing a dashboard electronics unit which measures distance traveled on motorways. The unit is required to be in every truck and bus (over 3.5 tons) using Slovak toll roads after January 1, though many truckers have delayed their installation in hopes of a price reduction. The delays have given those who delayed more to complain about, since they face mounting time pressure to get the units installed at one of only eight authorized outlets. As of December 28, some 50,000 trucks and buses had been equipped and registered for the new toll system, and the numbers are growing quickly. In a meeting on December 30, the truckers managed to wring a concession from Minister of Transportation Lubomir Vazny, lowering the price from EUR 134 to EUR 112.

3. Vazny did not concede to the truckers' second demand, a reset of the tolling rates and methodology. They complain that the system charges too much for delivery vehicles that hop on and off the motorways frequently, as opposed to vehicles that run up high mileage on the highways. This issue in particular has caused the smaller, more local firms to split from the larger companies--overwhelmingly long-haul truckers--who are perceived as controlling CESMAD. As part of the protest, the dissidents are now saying they will start another association to represent their own interests.

4. As things stand at midday December 31, the dissident members have backed down from earlier threats to blockade the borders and gas stations; they now plan to "meet" at gas stations throughout the country on January 4 to "discuss the situation" and "inform the public" about their grievances. What this means in practice is anybody's guess, but it is certain that the truckers will go to these discussion groups in their big trucks. This will result in a near-blockade that will make it necessary for motorists who can get through lines of trucks at station entrances to deal with truckers armed at least with leaflets. Vazny has promised to resume discussions with the truckers on Monday.

COMMENT

¶5. This protest is only the latest in the much-debated electronic tolling system's brief history. For over a year, the government has defended the selection of a Slovak-French consortium, SkyToll, to build the system. SkyToll submitted the highest of three qualified bids, with a spread of 15 percent above the next highest bidder. Despite some interest from the EC and protests from the losing bidders, the project has gone ahead with little review or audit. The protests over steadily rising toll estimates have marred the new system still further, as has the decision to limit it for the first year or more to heavy transport, the most lucrative segment of traffic on the roads. Passenger cars will be on the existing vignette (windshield sticker) system for at least another year. What will be in effect a nationwide strike next Monday will be a fitting launch for the project.

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